

Afterschool Programs Support Learning Recovery But Struggle with Staffing and Program Costs



I've been in the IGNITE Afterschool Program for as long as I can remember... I've spent time learning about things that help me during the school day. I've had time where we did our homework and the staff would help us and explain it in a way for us to understand... Not only did we have fun, but we also learned about life skills... I feel that every school should offer students the chance to join an afterschool program to provide safety, new learning experiences, and fun opportunities.”



Being a part of an afterschool program has truly changed my life. At the young age of 9, I migrated to the U.S. from Haiti, as my parents were seeking a great opportunity. I knew little to no English and was bullied because of how I looked... I was searching for my voice so I could share my concerns and be heard, but felt I didn't have a voice to advocate for what they believed in. That's when After-School All-Stars changed my perception of life and how to be a greater leader.”

Young people tell us that afterschool programs have a direct positive impact on their lives. A new national online survey of 1,116 afterschool program providers—conducted by Edge Research, Oct. 31–Dec. 5, 2023—reinforces this view, finding that programs are keeping young people connected, engaged, and inspired.

The survey, which represents more than 8,800 programs across all 50 states and Washington, D.C., also finds that afterschool programs face challenges largely due to staffing and program costs. A bright spot is that for afterschool programs that have been able to obtain federal pandemic relief funds, these funds have served as a welcome source of aid, helping programs keep their doors open, take steps to enhance staff recruitment and retention efforts, serve more students, and expand programming. However, as the end of this federal funding approaches, providers are very concerned about their future sustainability.

BY THE NUMBERS Fall 2023 Program Provider Survey Highlights

Most afterschool programs are providing:



94%
Academic enrichment



88%
Time to connect with peers



77%
Opportunities to build life skills

Afterschool program providers are concerned about:

81% Staffing

73% Long-term funding and future

Programs with pandemic relief funds are more likely than those without to:

Increase wages/salaries



Provide more professional development for staff



Provide benefits



Create more full-time positions

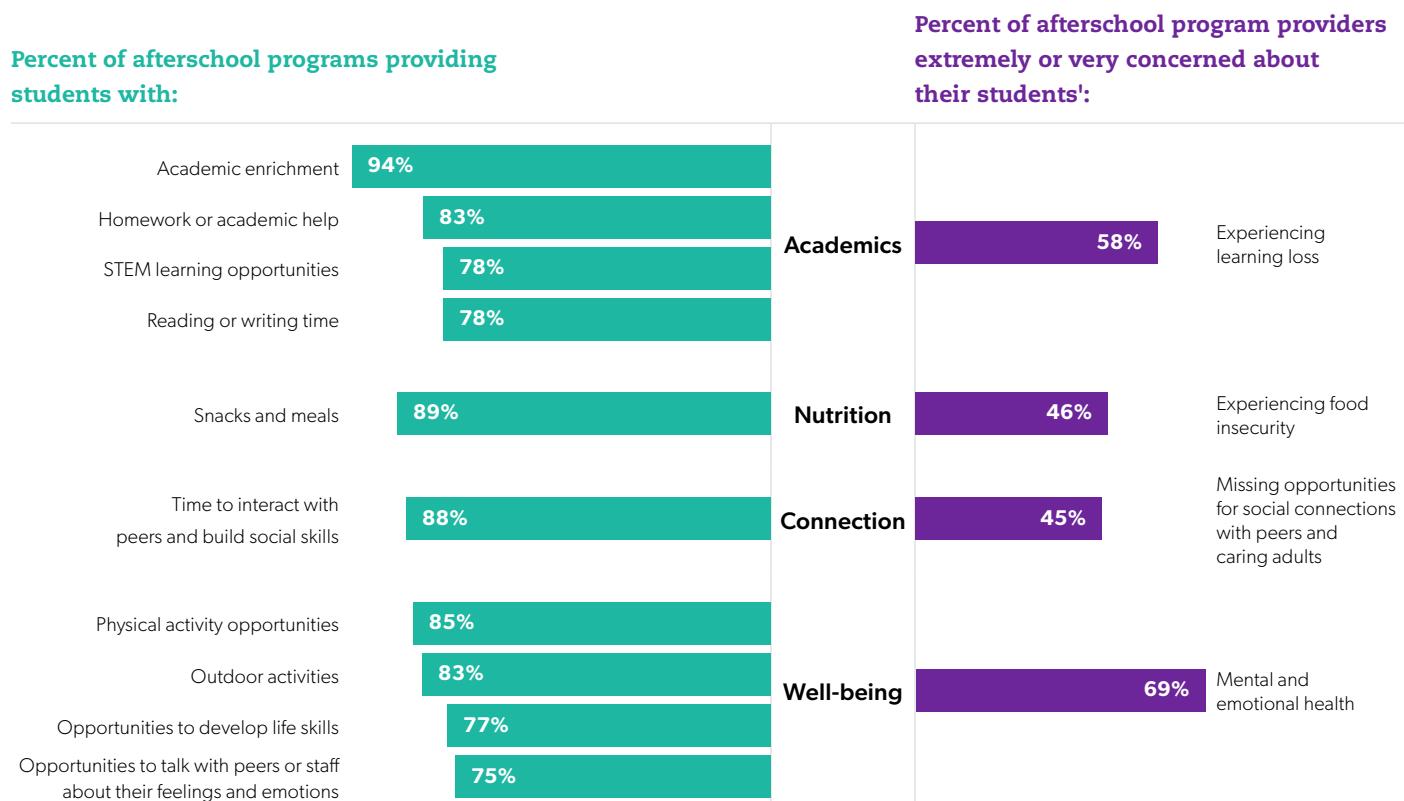


■ Pandemic relief funding ■ No pandemic relief funding

Advancing learning and promoting well-being

From homework help to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning opportunities to time connecting with peers and caring mentors to snacks and meals, children taking part in afterschool programs benefit from a holistic set of supports that foster their academic, social, and emotional development. Providers are concerned about young people in their community experiencing food insecurity, a lack of connections with peers and caring adults, and learning loss (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Afterschool programs are providing students a wealth of supports and directly addressing providers' concerns about the young people they serve.



Staffing and program costs are primary challenges for programs

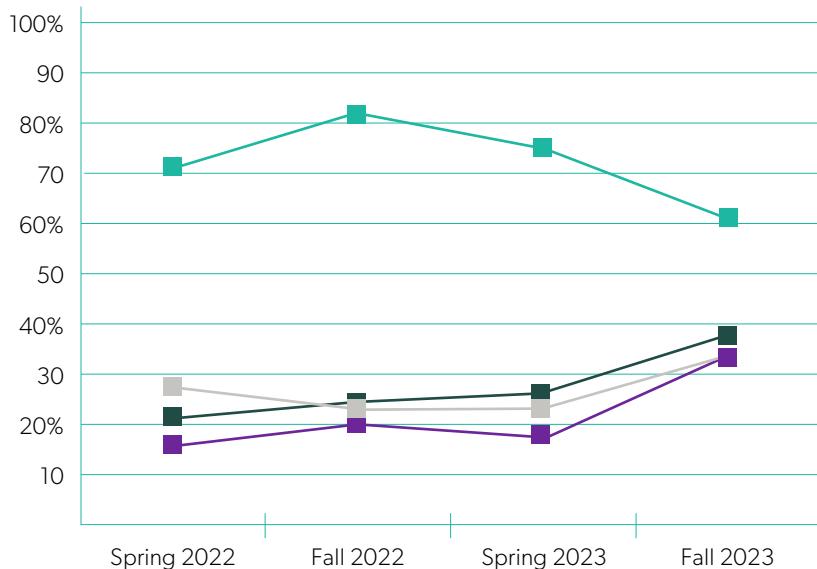
More than half of providers (52 percent) report a waiting list, and 27 percent say they are still not able to operate at pre-pandemic levels. Most program providers (80 percent) say they are concerned that there are children in their community who need afterschool programming but are not able to access it.

A closer examination of the quandaries facing afterschool programs points to the impact staffing and rising operating costs have on programs' ability to serve more students. For example, staffing was the overwhelming reason reported by programs as to why they are not operating at their full capacity. Approximately 6 in 10 program providers (61 percent) operating below their pre-COVID capacity limits said that staffing played a role, more than 20 percentage points higher than the next most common responses of a lack of interest from families (38 percent), insufficient funding (34 percent), and the higher costs of running a program (34 percent). It may be worth noting that although still high, the number of providers reporting that staffing was the reason for lower capacity decreased, while the lack of interest from families, insufficient funding, and increased cost of running programming all sharply increased (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Staffing is still the leading factor program providers say is contributing to their inability to return to normal, although it is trending downward.

Percent of program providers reporting that the following factors contributed to operating at a lower capacity:

■ Staffing ■ Lack of interest from families ■ Insufficient funding
■ Increased cost of running program



How Staffing Challenges, Costs, Funding, and Family Interest Interconnect

To attract new staff and keep the staff that they have, programs are taking steps such as increasing salaries and hourly wages; offering additional incentives such as bonuses; and providing new or additional benefits, including health and dental benefits, child care for staff, and professional development opportunities, all of which are additional expenses for providers. Layering on a lack of available funding in turn creates a roadblock for some providers to implement changes that would help them to address their staffing issues.

Families' interest in programs enters into the equation in a few different ways. For example, a number of providers report that families are finding alternative sources of care for their children that are less expensive; other providers point to the fact that they had to increase fees, which places programming out of reach for some families. Additionally, some providers attribute difficulties filling student slots to parents' flexible schedules and the ability to work from home, with parents opting to have their child attend programs less often. Others report that their families are struggling to find a way for their child to get to and from a program, a support that many programs are unable to provide due to a lack of available funds.

However, as some providers say that filling student slots is difficult, others say that they are worried about the ability to meet the demand for programming, reflecting the disparate circumstances providers find themselves in today. Majorities of providers say that they are concerned about challenges recruiting and enrolling families in their program (53 percent) or concerned about being able to meet the demand from families for programs (55 percent). In addition to showing the differing situations programs find themselves in, there are also—based on the percentages—at least some providers who say that they are concerned about both, which may be due to the uncertainty that still exists regarding parents' and students' decisions about the hours after school.

Staffing challenges easing but remain significant

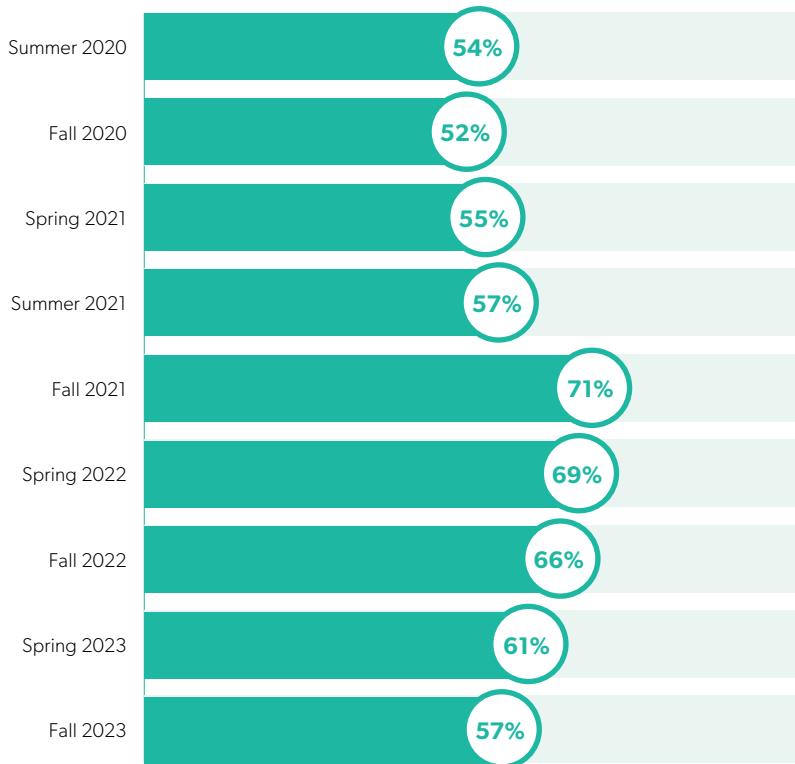
Most program providers (81 percent) continue to say that they have concerns about staffing for their program, which includes finding staff, retaining staff, or both. A majority of providers (57 percent) reported that they are very or extremely concerned. While the positive trend of providers concerned about staffing issues continues to trend downward (see Figure 3), when asked about their ability to staff their program, 57 percent of providers say that staffing has been at least somewhat difficult for their program, and approximately 1 in 5 providers (21 percent) said that they were hiring fewer staff compared to the previous spring because of challenges recruiting staff.

“Staffing shortages are the only thing preventing us from being able to accept additional students. We have a waitlist of 460 students, and we could serve them if we had the staff.”

– Fall 2023 program provider

FIGURE 3: While trending downward, a majority of program providers still say that they are extremely or very concerned about staffing issues.

Percent of program providers reporting that they are extremely or very concerned about finding staff to hire or staffing shortages:



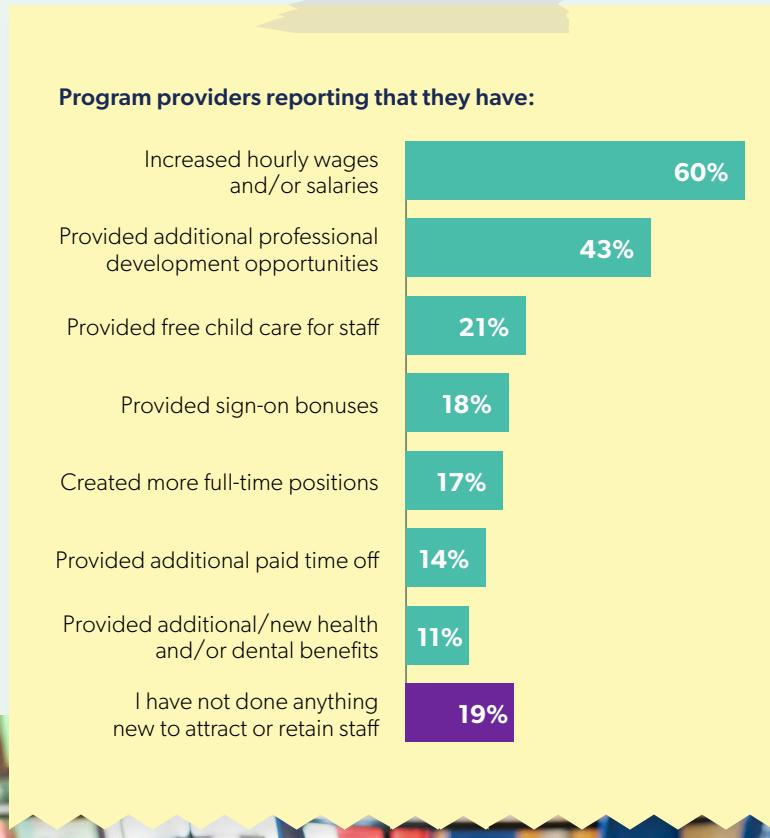
The leading factor driving staffing issues, based on program providers who report difficulties, is providers' struggle to be competitive with the salaries/wages offered by other companies, with 7 in 10 providers (71 percent) reporting this is an issue. Additionally, a majority of providers facing staffing challenges say that staff burnout (57 percent) and the inability to offer more hours to staff (52 percent) play a role. Less commonly reported reasons include limited opportunities to move up within the organization (32 percent), lack of resources to recruit and train new staff (24 percent), and lack of awareness of job opportunities within the out-of-school time field (24 percent).



Program providers' staffing concerns and staffing needs today

As 8 in 10 afterschool program providers (81 percent) are concerned about finding staff, retaining staff, or both, it is clear that staffing remains an immense challenge for program providers during the 2023-2024 school year.

Correspondingly, 81 percent of program providers say that they have taken at least one step to help recruit staff, keep staff on board, or both. Increasing hourly wages and/or salaries remains the most commonly reported measure taken to address staffing issues (60 percent), with providing additional professional development opportunities a distant second (43 percent). Other measures reported by providers include providing free child care for staff (21 percent), offering sign-on bonuses (18 percent), and creating more full-time positions (17 percent).



Afterschool providers reporting less trouble with staffing were asked a follow-up question to uncover strategies, tools, or resources are most helpful in their staffing efforts. Pay and benefits were mentioned most often. Other strategies reported were: providing a positive and supportive work culture, maintaining meaningful connections among staff, providing flexibility in scheduling, and looking to the community—including schools, universities, partner organizations, and alumni—to help fill positions or spread the word about staff openings.

When asked what resources would be of most help, advice on staff burnout and keeping teams engaged continues to be the most common response among providers, with 43 percent reporting it would be most helpful to their program. Roughly a quarter of providers said that trainings and resources related to supporting supervisors and managers (27 percent), recruiting and onboarding new staff (27 percent), and helping provide benefits and supports for staff, such as child care, flexible schedules, and creating additional full-time positions (25 percent) would be most helpful.

“[Our program] builds great relationships with our staff and creates intentional opportunities for them to learn from one another while incorporating their interests in our program setup so they know they have buy-in.”

—Fall 2023 program provider



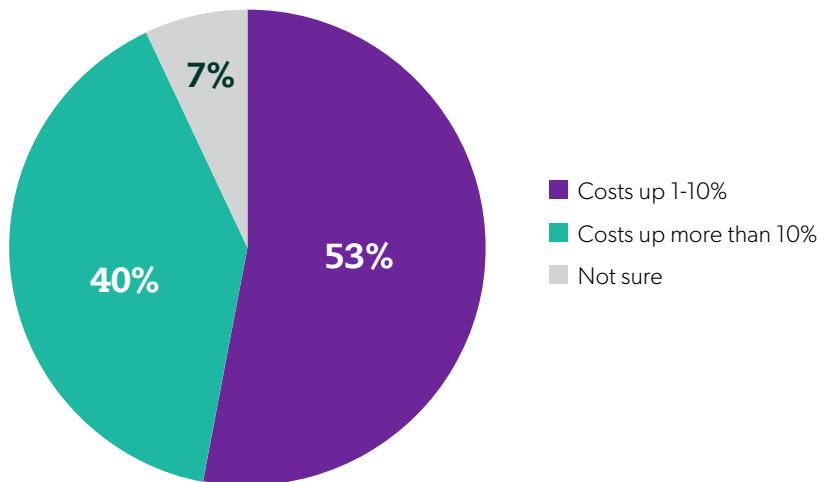
Program costs

Sustainability is the other key anxiety among program providers: 73 percent of providers are concerned about their program's long-term funding and future, with 46 percent identifying as extremely or very concerned. As 56 percent of providers are worried about a loss of funding to their program this year and nearly half of program providers (49 percent) report that their program's cost-per-child per week has increased in the past year, it is evident why program providers are expressing concerns about their ability to keep their doors open.

Of programs that have experienced an increase in their cost-per-child, the majority report an increase of 10 percent or less; however, 40 percent report an increase of 11 percent or more (see Figure 4). Similar to previous surveys, providers attribute their increase in costs primarily to staffing (82 percent), followed by inflation (69 percent), supplies (58 percent), food (49 percent), transportation (32 percent), and facility costs (30 percent).

FIGURE 4: 4 in 10 program providers with increased costs say that costs have risen by more than 10 percent

Among program providers whose costs-per-child have increased, the percentage costs have gone up:



“

Our program desperately needs funding in order to survive and continue to support and serve local families and students. The majority of our students are from low- and very low-income families who cannot afford to pay high fees. All of our families are on scholarships... making it necessary to secure funding from resources other than fees. The high cost of fundraising increases operational costs and stresses our human resources.”

– Fall 2023 program provider

A selection of program provider responses related to challenges surrounding expenses

“Increased cost of food is making it challenging.”

“More funding is needed for more programs and to pay qualified staff more to work in them.”

“Need more funding and additional resources in order to provide quality programs.”

“The cost for transportation from school to the center has increased by 50 percent since pre-COVID prices.”

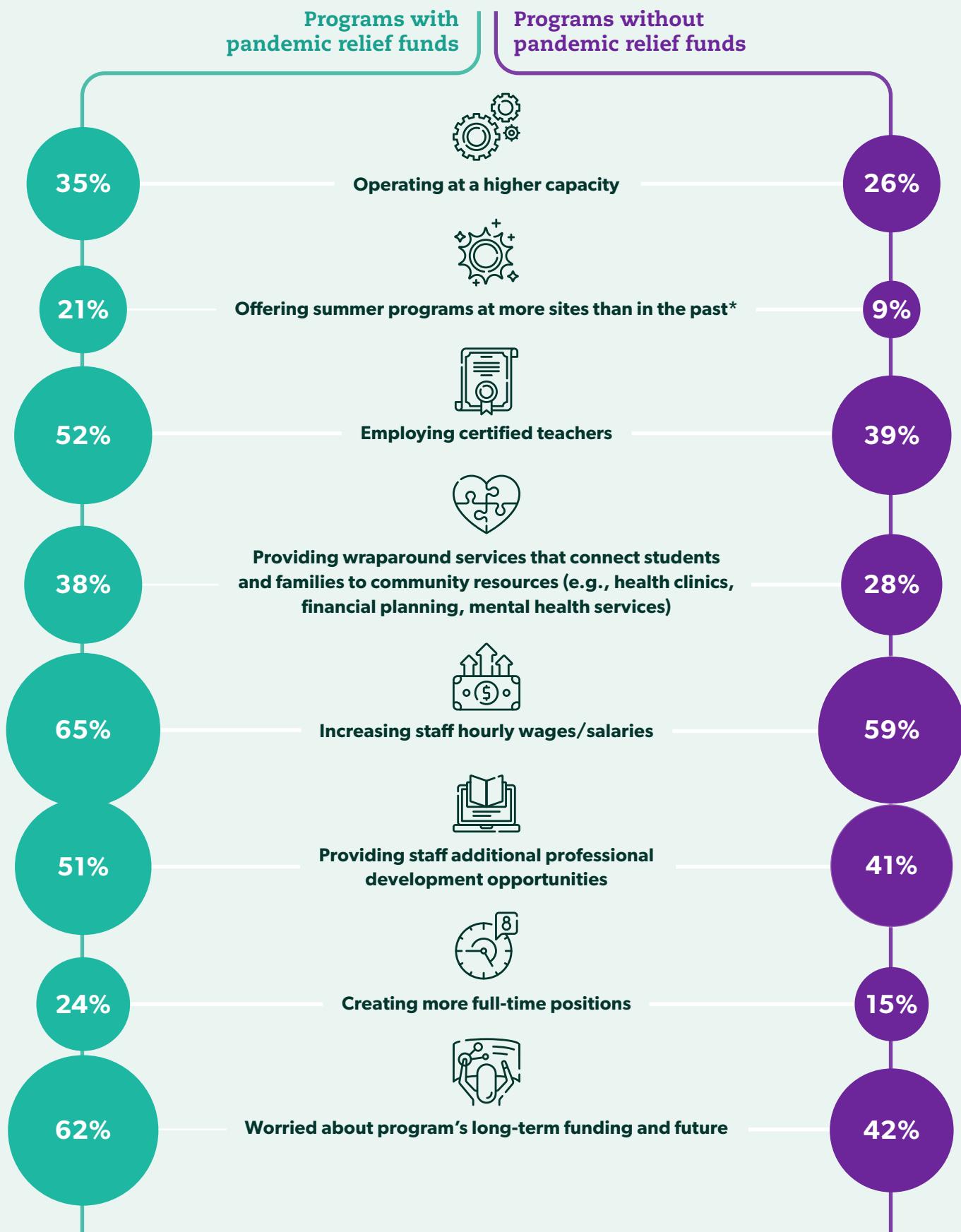
“The rising cost has limited the activities, both fun and educational along with cost of special programs.”

“Competitive wages have impacted the program but are necessary for quality outcomes, which our students and families deserve.”

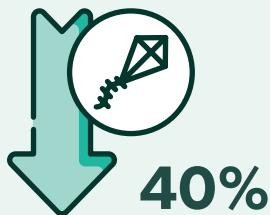
A Tale of Two Programs

While only a small portion of providers report receiving pandemic relief funds, the funding is making a significant impact on the services afterschool and summer programs provide.

Many worry about what will have to be cut when funding expires in 2025.



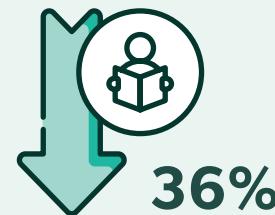
When pandemic relief funding ends, providers with this funding stream report that they will need to:



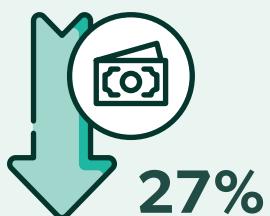
Reduce programming,
activities, and/or support



Reduce the number
of staff employed



Reduce the number
of students served



Reduce staff salaries
and/or benefits



Reduce hours
of operation

“We are working hard to write grants and seek other funding so that we can sustain all programs. We currently pass through a lot of funding to community program partners. That will be reduced significantly after COVID funding ends. Closing programs and/or reducing staff salaries would be a last resort.”

– Fall 2023 program provider

3 Barriers to Funding

Programs without pandemic relief funding that did not connect with their local education leaders about the opportunity said that the following were major factors:

35% Not knowing about pandemic relief funds available

30% Not knowing who in the district to reach out to

30% Not having enough information about funds to make the case to districts



Additional resources are needed to increase access to afterschool and summer programs

There are afterschool programs that have been able to take steps to address their staffing and expense challenges, and rise to meet the need for programming in their communities. For example, afterschool programs that were able to obtain pandemic relief funds report that these funds have helped them to expand program offerings, serve more students, and support staff recruitment and retention efforts. They were more likely than programs without these funds to report increasing salaries or wages for their staff and providing more benefits for staff. Additionally, programs with pandemic relief funds were 10 percentage points more likely than programs without funding to report operating at a higher capacity than they did before COVID (35 percent vs. 26 percent).

However, with less than 1 in 5 providers (18 percent) reporting that they have received pandemic relief funds, and only one-third of providers (34 percent) saying that their organization has reached out to or been in conversations with local education leaders about pandemic relief funds, there remains time to see gains in these areas. School districts still have until Sept. 30, 2024, to obligate American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds (ARP ESSER) and until Jan. 30, 2025, to spend funds, of which approximately \$54.9 billion is still available as of February 2024. State and Local Fiscal Recovery funds, of which approximately \$42 billion is still available, must be spent by Dec. 31, 2026. The Department of Education also released a letter that gave school districts the option to request a waiver that would extend the ARP ESSER spending deadline for up to 14 months.

In addition to the time remaining to access these pandemic relief dollars, there is also the potential funding cliff that is approaching when these funding streams come to an end if no other funding helps to fill in the hole that it will create for schools and afterschool and summer program providers. There remain nearly 25 million students who are not in an afterschool program but want to be, presenting a strong case for the need for increased investment in afterschool and summer programs.

While nearly 3 in 4 program providers (72 percent) say that they are optimistic about the future of their afterschool program, they also make clear that without adequate support from federal, state, and local governments, it will be difficult to keep up their level of services.

